

Research Project Proposal  
Daniel Ellsberg  
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U.S. First Use Threats and the Construction of Instability

I propose to do research in a number of closely related areas which bear on the motives and strategies that drive and shape U.S. nuclear arms and arms control programs and war planning, from the perspective of high-level managers of national security. I will focus on the particular, little-recognized pattern of U.S. first use nuclear threats in U.S. interventions in the Third World, and the impact of such readiness to threaten or initiate tactical nuclear war on U.S. and Soviet weapons programs, international security, and the likelihood of limited or general nuclear war.

The four areas of research to be considered have several properties in common. They are each highly important, in my judgment, to the questions above, yet they have been almost entirely ignored in most discussions of policy relating to international security. With respect to each of them I happen to have both personal, "inside" experience, by way of past official staffwork or research at a high level--which I propose to draw on as part of my data and use to illuminate other parts--and I have pursued long-term research. Additionally, in each case critically relevant new data have fairly recently become available which yet remain significantly neglected in most analyses.

These related areas of research are:

The nuclear dimension of U.S. intervention policy outside Europe, and the likelihood of U.S. first use of nuclear weapons in the Third World.

The implications of U.S. intervention and first use policy for strategic arms programs and arms control.

The emergence of strategic instability: its causes, its risks, and its potential cure.

The moral and psychological universe of high-level national security managers, as this bears on the risks of nuclear war.

A starting point for my current research in each of these areas will be a body of data that was virtually unknown until my own investigation began a dozen years ago. The data concerns recurrent instances of threats or preparations for first use of nuclear weapons at the Presidential level during international crises.

In 1981 I presented for the first time in print the evidence then available for the following proposition: that every President from Truman to Reagan, with the possible exception of Ford, had felt compelled to consider and prepare, or threaten, imminent U.S. initiation of tactical or strategic nuclear warfare, in the context of an ongoing non-nuclear conflict or crisis.

My article, a preliminary survey and comparative analysis of these cases, and an early statement of my hypotheses on their implications, began:

"The notion common to nearly all Americans that 'no nuclear weapons have been used since Nagasaki' is mistaken. It is not the case that U.S. nuclear weapons have simply piled up over the years...unused and unusable, save for the single function of deterring their use against us by the Soviets. Again and again, generally in secret from the American public, U.S. nuclear weapons have been used, for quite different purposes: in the precise way that a gun is used when you point it at someone's head in a direct confrontation, whether or not the trigger is pulled."

In the last few years other investigations, some stimulated by this article, have uncovered more instances and considerably more evidence for my generalization, based on newly declassified documents and on interviews of decision-makers. Nevertheless, both the individual cases and the existence of the pattern remain so unfamiliar, even to many highly informed researchers and former officials, and they are so important to the research I propose, that I present my 1981 list here, expanded to include recently reported instances (in brackets):

--Truman's deployment of B-29's, officially described as "atomic-capable", to bases in Britain and Germany at the outset of the Berlin Blockade, June 1948.

--Truman's press conference warning that nuclear weapons were under consideration, the day after marines were surrounded by Chinese Communist troops at the Chosin Reservoir, Korea, November 30, 1950.

--Eisenhower's secret nuclear threats against China, to force and maintain a settlement in Korea, 1953.

--Secretary of State Dulles's secret offer to Prime Minister Bidault of three tactical nuclear weapons in 1954 to relieve the French troops besieged by the Indochinese at Dienbienphu.

--["Diplomatic use of the Bomb" (Nixon's description) to deter Soviet unilateral action against the British and French in the Suez crisis.]

--Eisenhower's secret directive to the Joint Chiefs during the "Lebanon Crisis" in 1958 to prepare to use nuclear weapons, if necessary, to prevent an Iraqi move into the oilfields of Kuwait.

--Eisenhower's secret directive to the Joint Chiefs in 1958 to plan to use nuclear weapons, imminently, against China if the Chinese Communists should attempt to invade the island of Quemoy, occupied by Chiang's troops, a few miles offshore mainland China.

--[Comparable threats made during the 1954 Quemoy crisis.]

--[1959 Berlin Crisis (Nixon)]

--The Berlin Crisis, 1961.

--The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962.

--Numerous "shows of nuclear force" involving demonstrative deployments or alerts--deliberately visible to adversaries and intended as a "nuclear signal"--of forces with a designated role in U.S. plans for strategic nuclear war.,

--Much public discussion in newspapers and in the Senate, of (true) reports that the White House had been advised of the possible necessity of nuclear weapons to defend marines surrounded at Khe Sanh, Vietnam, 1968.

--Nixon's secret threats of massive escalation, including possible use of nuclear weapons, conveyed to the North Vietnamese by Henry Kissinger, 1969-1972.

--[Threats to deter Soviet attack on Chinese nuclear capability, 1969-1970. (Nixon)]

--[Threats and naval deployment to deter Soviet response to possible Chinese intervention against India in the Indo-Pakistani war, 1971 (Nixon)]

--[Nixon puts SAC on high alert in October 1973 to deter the Soviets from intervening with ground forces to separate the combattants in the Arab-Israeli war, by underscoring U.S. threats to oppose them by force and expressing U.S. willingness to risk escalation to all-out nuclear war. (Nixon)]

--The Carter Doctrine on the Middle East (January 1980) as explained by Defense Secretary Harold Brown, Assistant Secretary of State William Dyess, and other spokesmen, reaffirmed, in essence, by President Reagan in 1981.

--[Serious White House and JCS consideration of possible imminent use of tactical nuclear weapons if a secret Soviet buildup on the Iranian border led to a Soviet invasion of Iran, followed by expression of warnings to the Soviet Union.] <sup>1</sup>

The implications of these cases and the overall pattern, along with other data and considerations, will be explored in relation to the four general areas mentioned above. I now turn to these, listing some representative questions, hypotheses, and evidence that will be addressed in each.

I. The nuclear dimension of U.S. intervention policy outside Europe, and the likelihood of U.S. first use of nuclear weapons in the Third World.

--How many other "secret nuclear crises" remain to be discovered?

The latest instance, relating to possible use of U.S. nuclear weapons in August 1980, emerged from secrecy just this month in an article in the New York Times which may be the first in that publication ever to mention a pattern of past Presidential threats. As in most past cases, including Nixon's revelations

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<sup>1</sup> See "A Call to Mutiny," Protest and Survive, 1981,; references are given in each case to the open literature, along with extensive quotations. The cases in brackets are cited by Richard Nixon in "A Nation Coming Into Its Own," Time, July 29, 1985. An important case study of the 1973 Middle East alert is presented by Barry Blechman and Douglas Hart in "The Political Utility of Nuclear Weapons: The 1973 Middle East Crisis," International Security, Summer 1982, Vol. 7, No. 1. The August 1980 White House discussion is reported by Richard Halloran in the New York Times, September 2, 1986, based on interviews and an account of the Secretary of Defense and JCS involvement by Benjamin F. Schemmer: "Was the U.S. Ready to Resort to Nuclear Weapons for the Persian Gulf in 1980?", Armed Forces Journal International, September 1986.

last year, the nuclear dimension of this decision making, confirmed by White House participants, was not mentioned by the President in his memoirs.

--What further evidence can be found on the details of these incidents as a basis for a comparative analysis?

--What are the various functions of the extreme secrecy surrounding these episodes? What are its various consequences for the bureaucratic process of decision making? [This was a specific aspect of my official study of decision making in nuclear crises in 1964, on which I will draw.] What does it reveal about White House perceptions of public attitudes on risk-taking and moral constraints relating to nuclear weapons? What are its implications for the democratic control of foreign and military policy?

--How close has the United States come to executing first use threats in past crises? What is the meaning of "close": how is it usefully measured? How are the intentions of the various Presidents to be understood in these instances? To what extent were any of the preparations or threats "bluffs"? What is the meaning of "bluff"? What risks are associated with such bluffs?

--What does this history reveal about the actions that may be taken to enhance the credibility and effectiveness of threats? What has been the apparent effect of these actions on the expectations and responses of adversaries and of allies? How reliable are "crisis communications" by means of military deployments and alerts, and what effect do they have on U.S. commitment and loss of control?

--What are the interests in the Third World that have appeared so vital to American Presidents and high-level decision makers that they have considered launching nuclear weapons to protect these interests?

--What factors in international security condition the likelihood of conflicts in which such threats might arise in the future? Are such threats getting more or less likely? What policies would make them less likely? What factors condition the likelihood that such a threat might be carried out in the future?

--What factors bear on the likelihood that the Soviets might reply to such a first use?

--Has the perceived credibility of U.S. first use threats at various times been a factor in judging the feasibility of U.S. interventions? Has it thereby determined the dimensions of the U.S. sphere of influence, or determined what interests can prudently be perceived as vital?

II. The implications of U.S. intervention and first use policy for strategic arms programs and arms control.

and

III. The emergence of strategic instability: its causes, its risks, and its potential cure.

Since US adversaries in the Third World have so far all been non-nuclear, consideration of US nuclear first use against them has offered the prospect that it might remain unilateral, and limited to their territory, "safely for the US," in a way that would hardly be imaginable if nuclear weapons were used against Soviet troops, especially in the Soviet Union or Europe, East or West.

But that "safety" remains provisional, because all of these non-nuclear adversaries have also been allies or clients of the Soviet Union, which has had at least the physical capability to provide them with a "nuclear umbrella"--the promise of nuclear retaliation to a nuclear attack against them--since the early Fifties. Consideration of US first use against a Third World adversary has always had to deal with the implicit possibility of a Soviet or Chinese Communist response, either nuclear or a non-nuclear response that would require still further escalation.

The central hypothesis to be explored is that US policies on nuclear arms and arms control are designed, in part, to support the credibility of threats that the US will, if necessary, initiate nuclear war, essentially to protect US non-nuclear interventionary forces from non-nuclear challenges to their operations in support of US interests overseas.

Theater and strategic nuclear forces, according to this hypothesis, are designed to do this by enhancing the credibility of US threats to escalate nuclear war--possibly to the level of a strategic preemptive US first strike--if US first-use of nuclear weapons should lead to Soviet retaliation in kind or Soviet escalation.

In an era of relative parity, it is further presumed, adequate credibility that a non-mad leader might carry out threats to escalate to a large-scale strategic attack depends on the plausibility of an incentive to preempt: which depends on a considerable mutual vulnerability to disarming attack and thus a mutual basis for fear that the other may preempt. Thus--in the absence of alternative bases for adequate credibility of threats to escalate to a first strike--a reliance on first use threats to protect US vital interests abroad generates a willingness to tolerate, and even to construct, conditions of increased "instability."

This relatively unfamiliar interpretation can "predict" and explain--demonstrably better, I believe, than any competing hypotheses, a number of which will be also considered--both past and current development and deployment programs in considerable detail, in terms of numbers and qualitative technological characteristics of weapons and basing, and the general nature of US arms control policy, both in terms of proposals offered and accepted, and, perhaps more important, proposals rejected or never advanced by the US Government.

In particular, it can account for an otherwise paradoxical pattern: that programs on both sides appear flagrantly to flaunt the prescriptions for strategic "stability" that were first elaborated in the late '50's and have been regarded as desiderata by consensus among analysts and officials ever since.

--What do U.S. planners see as requirements for deterring the Soviet Union from retaliating to U.S. first use of nuclear weapons? Elements include: characteristics of weapons systems and deployment; announced strategies of escalation; alerts; weapons movements; command and control capabilities; defensive systems; and arms control policies.

--How do these presumed requirements compare to past and current strategic weapons programs? Is there evidence that the requirement of deterring or responding to Soviet retaliation to U.S. first use has been a conscious consideration in programming U.S. strategic forces and the selection and rejection of official U.S. arms control proposals? Is this inferred requirement a good predictor of such policies?

--Is U.S. "strategic superiority" a requirement for the credibility of U.S. first use threats? Or can strategic instability substitute to some degree for an unobtainable "superiority" as a basis for credibility of U.S. first use threats? (That is, as a deterrent to Soviet nuclear retaliation to U.S. nuclear first use.)

--What characteristics of strategic posture on both sides would incline either the U.S. or the Soviet Union to move to an automated launch-on-warning system? Likewise, what conditions would lead to decentralized delegation of authority to use nuclear weapons in crises? [D.E. background comment]

--What characteristics of weapons systems would increase the likelihood of deliberate preemption by either side in a nuclear crisis?

--How is the direction of current weapons programs influenced by these considerations?

--How would the explosion of tactical nuclear weapons (where and how many) bear on the likelihood of preemption?

--What role do decapitation strategies play in U.S. or Soviet preemption planning?

--What arms control proposals would forestall developments that increase the likelihood of launch-on-warning, delegation, or preemption? Are any of them included among current U.S. arms control proposals?

#### IV. The moral and psychological universe of high-level national security managers, as this bears on the risks of nuclear war.

--In view of the Just War doctrine, in law and Christian ethics, how likely is a President to risk the massacre of non-combatants by first use of nuclear weapons?

--Could a President get such orders carried out? Could he get these planned and prepared? If so: how is this to be explained? What is the practical moral universe of the managers of the U.S. security apparatus, and does it differ coherently from Just War principles? [See evolution of strategic bombing practice in WWII.]

--What is the role of an ethic of obedience and group loyalty? [See the work of Milgram and Kelman.]

--What is the role of a psychology of compliance among the decision-makers and their staffs?

--Under what circumstances might "normal", conscientious national leaders deliberately undertake actions predicted to have a high risk of social and moral catastrophe? [See work of Kahneman and Tversky, and Berman on Lyndon Johnson's escalation in 1965.]

How might these considerations bear on a Presidential decision to undertake first use of nuclear weapons, or to escalate a nuclear conflict?

#### A Note on Significance

The first import of this project, its very starting point, is to focus attention upon a generally-unimagined danger in the nuclear era: the real possibility that nuclear weapons will explode upon humans in a Third World country because an American President has deliberately chosen, in what he perceives as a desperate situation, to initiate tactical nuclear war. Whatever anyone might think about the fitness of that decision or the policy that led up to it, one can only receive the news of that prospect as a frightening addition to the risks of our time.



There are experts today who believe that analyses of stability are outmoded in their ominous inferences, because with the current level of nuclear warheads on both sides, they cannot imagine circumstances under which a sane leader would pursue the hypothetical advantages that his strategic "damaging-limiting" forces have supposedly bought for him. But these systems have not been tested in the crucible of a limited nuclear war. And these experts, I have found in discussion, have not considered the likelihood--in the light of the hidden history of nuclear crises--that such a war might actually occur by decision of an American President.

Contemplation of these possibilities, I judge from my own experience, leads to a very increased sense of urgency about stopping, either by unilateral initiative or bilateral negotiation, the new destabilizing weapons developments. For arms control, an entirely new framework for negotiations is implied, focusing on the characteristics of weapons, including accuracy and deployment, rather than on numbers. The short-run criterion of stability would put great premium on totally averting the testing or deployment of whole new types of weapons systems that encourage preemption, delegation, or launch on warning approaches.

To reduce the risk of nuclear war, either limited or all-out, it is more important than most have realized to reexamine, reevaluate, and modify--perhaps first bringing under more democratic control--US interrelationships and mutual dependence with regimes, resources and people in the Third World; US foreign and interventionary policies; US first-use policy in the Third World as well as Europe; and the linkages between all of these and US strategic nuclear forces: threats of escalation and weapons programs.